

Statement of John R. Bass
Nominee to be Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
September 12, 2017

Mr. Chairman, Senator Cardin, Members of the Committee – thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as the President’s nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. It would be an honor to again represent our great nation overseas, and I want to thank the President and Secretary Tillerson for the opportunity to do so. I look forward, if confirmed, to working closely with you to advance America’s interests in Afghanistan. I will welcome frequent opportunities to consult with you.

I am grateful to be joined today by my wife Holly, a career diplomat who also will serve in Kabul, and my sister, Kristin Bass. I would like to recognize and thank colleagues here today who became family during our service together in Baghdad and other challenging locations. All of us who serve in harm’s way can only succeed with the support of our family and friends.

During a career devoted to serving the nation, I have spent much of the past decade focused on curbing threats terrorists pose to our country and allies. I have supported through diplomacy our efforts in Afghanistan. As U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Georgia, I mobilized and sustained additional military and financial contributions to support the International Security Assistance Force and its successor. If confirmed, I expect to apply extensive experience leveraging our bilateral and multilateral partnerships to achieve the results we all seek in Afghanistan – a political settlement and sufficient government capacity to prevent its use anew as a platform from which terrorists can strike our Homeland.

I know many of you, and many of our fellow Americans, are questioning why the United States must continue to devote so many resources to supporting the people and government of Afghanistan. I understand why they ask: can we afford these big expenditures at a time when we have so many pressing needs here at home? I understand why many Americans carry these sentiments.

I believe the short answer, though, is that we cannot afford not to sustain our efforts in Afghanistan. As a nation, we cannot afford the increased risks and peril that would come from a wholesale departure or rapid reduction in our footprint in Afghanistan.

We don’t have to guess at the consequences from that policy choice. We experienced those consequences 16 years ago. And on a smaller but no less lethal scale, we have experienced the consequences that followed when ISIS set up shop in ungoverned spaces in Syria and Iraq, plotting, directing, and inspiring terrorist attacks against the United States and many of our friends and allies. We also know ISIS has used these spaces to conduct research on how to conduct mass casualty attacks using chemical weapons and to evade detection equipment – just as an al-Qai’da affiliate did in Yemen seven years ago.

As the President made clear in his address to the nation on August 21, we cannot – and will not – shy away from tackling these challenges head-on. The security and safety of our homeland and our fellow citizens demands it.

I'm not naïve about the scale and complexity of the challenges we and our allies face in supporting the Afghan people and their government. Fortunately, we have more to work with now than 10 or 5 years ago – starting with a government, led by President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, that wants our help; increasingly listens to our advice; and is making progress building a reasonably effective government that can provide security and basic functions for most Afghans. That sounds like a low bar and modest results for our efforts. But if you think about where Afghans started 16 years ago, they have made important strides forward. In many key areas – health, education, access to news and information, governance – Afghanistan today is a different country. We have real achievements to build on. President Ghani and his government have made more progress curbing corruption in the past year than in the previous 15 years combined.

In seeking to fulfill my mandate, I will follow the new strategy approved by the President last month. The strategy accounts for both enduring challenges and new factors in Afghanistan and across South Asia. It directs us to tackle the root causes of the enduring conflict in Afghanistan – which include the safe havens the Taliban continues to enjoy in Pakistan, and the support it at times receives from other neighboring states – rather than simply treating the symptoms.

The goal of the new strategy is a sustainable political outcome that prevents the reestablishment of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan. We will make clear to the Taliban that it cannot win or outlast us on the battlefield; the only path to peace and political legitimacy is through a negotiated political settlement. As you have heard in briefings on the new strategy, our support for the Afghan government's efforts to combat Taliban violence and intimidation and resolve the conflict will be dictated by conditions on the ground – not by abstract deadlines. Through our actions, we will demonstrate to the Taliban that it cannot wait us out. We are signaling support to the Afghan public and the entire region that the United States is determined to create the conditions that enable a political settlement. Those settlement talks, if and when they come, must remain an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led process.

As the President emphasized, this strategy requires a whole-of-government effort. Diplomacy and focused efforts by our development professionals are instrumental to success. A key element of our diplomacy focuses beyond Afghanistan's borders. If confirmed, my first regional engagement priority, as directed by Washington, will be to work closely with Ambassador Hale in Islamabad to encourage and support improvements in Afghanistan and Pakistan's bilateral relationship. I intend to supplement this effort with equally focused work with my fellow ambassadors to ensure key regional countries with a stake in the region's stability – including India, Russia and China – are doing everything possible to achieve that shared objective. We must address

and prevent the hedging among some regional actors that has empowered the Taliban and lengthened the conflict.

Success cannot – and will not – be driven primarily by the efforts and sacrifices of American soldiers, diplomats and taxpayers. There is a broad international military coalition led by NATO and a community of donor nations that have been essential partners in our common effort to stabilize Afghanistan. We will sustain the support from these partners and in many cases will look to them to do more.

This sustained commitment should in no way be misunderstood as a desire by the United States or our allies to occupy or remain in Afghanistan against the will of its people. We respect Afghans' fierce independence, which is reminiscent of Americans'. We do not seek any permanent military bases in their country – or a presence that would threaten Afghanistan's neighbors.

Success will depend fundamentally on the continued bravery and sacrifices of the Afghan security forces, and improved effectiveness of the national government. If confirmed, I will work closely with General Nicholson and the Pentagon's leadership to help the relevant Afghan ministries provide the logistical and materiel support essential to the success of their troops in the field.

The Afghan government has large obligations to fulfill as well. As the President made clear, our commitment to Afghanistan does not mean we are in the business of nation-building. The Afghans must build their own nation. We cannot do it for them. But we will work with them to encourage the kinds of reforms that will enable Afghanistan to be more self-sufficient and less reliant on donor assistance over time. The Afghan government welcomes this approach. Chief Executive Abdullah has recently declared: "Nation building is our job."

On August 23, two days after the President's address to the nation, President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah joined our Charge and General Nicholson to launch a new set of initiatives – the Kabul Compact. This compact sets benchmarks for reforms, including anti-corruption reforms, across the government. The Afghan government has asked us to hold them accountable to these commitments; if confirmed, I will lead our efforts to do so. Our support for their reforms will help bolster the legitimacy of the Afghan government. It will make their security forces more effective.

Another critical area for reform involves steps to improve the electoral process, avoid the conflict and discord we saw in the 2014 presidential election, and increase the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of its citizens. Next year's parliamentary elections will be an important test of the Afghan government's reform efforts and a bellweather for the presidential election in 2019. In addition to these reforms, we will continue to support efforts to ensure the ability of women to participate in the electoral process, both as voters and as candidates.

We also will continue to support the Afghan government's efforts to continue to grow the licit economy and increase public revenues. As with reform and governance, this is properly the responsibility of the Afghan government, not the American taxpayer. As it focuses on creating the legal framework and conditions to attract additional foreign investors and partners to develop the country's enormous resource potential, I will ensure we support American companies who see those opportunities – as we do in embassies around the world.

Making progress has been hard. It will continue to be hard. That does not mean it is not worth the effort – because all of the alternatives lead to worse outcomes for the United States.

The perilous times in which we live demand that every U.S. ambassador think first of the safety and security of their people. That has been true for me over three difficult, dangerous years in Turkey, and it will be especially true in Afghanistan. Determining how best to achieve our key objectives while also protecting our people will be foremost in my mind, every day, if I am confirmed.

Like my fellow diplomats, I am also a taxpayer, and wasted resources frustrate me. If confirmed, I will do everything possible to ensure that the funds we spend in Afghanistan are used effectively and transparently.

In closing, I want to thank this committee for the support it has provided, and continues to provide, for the vital work of the U.S. Mission in Afghanistan. If confirmed, I would welcome a candid, ongoing dialogue with you about the challenges and opportunities we face. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I look forward to your questions.